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ABSTRACT

Various economic, technology-related, and other factors have converged to serve as a catalyst for the emergence of workers who consider themselves free agents. Estimates of the number of free agent workers range from 12.9 to 25 million. Individual free agent workers may take widely varying approaches to their careers; however, all have taken charge of their careers, consider interesting work a priority, and make increasing their skills an important part of their strategy. Emerging concepts of career development pertinent to the free agent worker model include the concept of the boundary-less career (not tied to traditional career paths) and internal versus external careers (self-estimation of career events versus actual jobs held). Because free agent workers have nontraditional careers, they lack access to the traditional career development opportunities that are available to workers who follow more traditional career paths. Two important career development strategies for free agent workers are engaging in learning and networking. Free agent learning is voluntary, self-directed, and focused primarily on new jobs. Networks serve several career development-related purposes for free agent learners. For example, networks fulfill free agent workers' need for contact with others, and they provide the contacts needed for professional success and survival. The networks may be virtual or take more traditional forms, including regular conference calls and meetings. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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Career Development of Free Agent Workers

by Susan Imel
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A number of factors have converged to create a new type of worker known as free agent. Downsizing by corporations during the 1980s and early 1990s signaled the end of an era where loyalty to an organization or corporation paid off in a lifetime guarantee of employment. Technology has created opportunities for work to be done differently, including virtually. The transition to the knowledge-based economy has generated a demand for workers with certain types of skills; workers possessing such skills are in short supply now and in the foreseeable future. These factors have served as a catalyst for the emergence of workers who consider themselves free agents. Like professional athletes or actors, free agent workers do not usually attach themselves permanently to a specific company or organization, but tend to go where their skills and talents are in demand (Conlin 2000; Leonhardt 2000; Packer 2000). Because free agent workers do not usually have long-term attachments to one organization, their needs for career development must be met in nontraditional ways. This *Digest* examines the career development of free agent workers. It begins by defining free agent workers and then looks at the congruence between the rise of free agent workers and changing ideas about careers and career development. A concluding section identifies strategies that free agent workers are using to meet their career development needs.

Free Agent Workers

Who are free agent workers? According to Arnold Packer, "Free agents, usually young people, don't expect (or want) a lifetime career with a single employer. They have taken responsibility for charting and preparing their own professional futures. In that group, changing jobs is commonplace" (Packer 2000, p. 41). Being a free agent worker is as much a matter of mindset as of mobility. Free agent workers think of themselves as having talent to sell and they shop it around for the best offer, but money alone does not ensure their loyalty or interest (Smith et al. 2000).

How many free agent workers are there? Estimates of the number of free agent workers range from a high of 25 million (Pink 1997) to a low of 12.9 million (Leonhardt 2000), but these estimates include different categories of workers. The 12.9 million figure is based on 1999 Bureau of Labor Statistics data on the number of self-employed individuals outside of agriculture; this number actually declined by 1 million between 1994 and 1999. Pink's estimate of 25 million was calculated by adding self-employed (14 million), independent contractors (8.3 million), and individuals working through temporary agencies (2.3 million). Pink refers to this combined group as the "free agent nation." Not all of the individuals included in Pink's estimate would fit the definition of free agent workers, however, because many have not voluntarily chosen to work in these categories. For the most part, free agent workers are well educated and possess high levels of skills that are in demand (Leonhardt 2000; Packer 2000); they have chosen a free agent lifestyle because it frees them from organizational politics, provides them opportunities to learn, gives them more control of their time, and provides 30% to 200% more income than their counterparts in traditional jobs earn (Conlin 2000).

The following examples demonstrate that free agent workers vary widely in how they approach their careers:

- Andy Abramson, a 40-year-old sports marketing consultant, estimates he makes 75% more as a free agent than he would in a traditional marketing position. He finds that the constant flow of new projects keeps work interesting; furthermore, he has equity stakes in a variety of companies for which he does projects. In addition to the higher income, perks include a month in Europe each year (Conlin 2000).
- Rich Preziotti represents an example of how one can be a free agent without changing companies. After graduating from business school in 1991, he began work at Honeywell as a financial analyst. Nine years and seven jobs later, he is a vice president and general manager of a $450 million per year speciality wax division. He says that he has learned by being challenged and figuring out what to do, not necessarily by knowing in advance how to get the job done. He appreciates the career development he has received at Honeywell but does not want to be called a company man. "The employer-employee contract that used to exist 25 years ago doesn't exist today. It's too competitive a work environment," he says (Smith et al. 2000, online, n.p.).
- Edie Schillings is a free agent in training. A 56-year old registered nurse, Schillings is looking for ways to be challenged intellectually as well as increase her skills so she is studying online to become a legal nurse consultant. After completing the 12- to 18-month course and passing a board exam, she will be able to work for lawyers on product liability or medical malpractice cases or for insurance companies evaluating medical risk. As a legal nurse consultant, Schillings expects to double her income and have a more flexible work schedule (Smith et al. 2000).

The three individuals profiled here exemplify many of the characteristics of free agent workers. All have taken charge of their careers and interesting work is a priority. Also, increasing their skills has been an important part of their strategy. If training was not provided, they acquired skills on their own (ibid.).

Changing Conceptions about Careers

The model of the free agent worker has emerged during a period when conceptions about careers and career patterns have been changing. The career development literature, for example, contains discussions of the boundaryless career, one that is characterized by independence from rather than dependence on traditional organizational career arrangements (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). "The typical boundaryless career is characterized by a career identity that is independent of the employer (e.g., 'I'm a software engineer'); the accumulation of employment-flexible know-how (e.g., how to work in an innovative, efficient, and/or quality-enhancing way); and the development of networks that are independent of the firm (e.g., occupation or industry based), nonhierarchic (e.g., communities of practice), and worker enacted" (DeFillippi and Arthur 1996, pp. 123-24).

A relational approach to careers is another recent concept in the career development literature (Hall 1996). In describing the relational career, Hall speaks of the external and the internal career. Previously, the external career—the actual jobs or positions an individual held—was more important. Today, the internal career, which is the individual's perceptions and self-constructions of career events, is of greater consequence. In the relational view, career development is seen as a mutual process, a process of co-learning. The objective of career development is not mastery and independence but rather interdependence. The relational aspects of work environments can have a powerful influence on career development be-

cause they provide opportunities for interaction, the development of competence, and a more confident self-identity.

The emergence of free agent workers can be seen as a natural outgrowth of changing concepts about careers and career development. Stroh and Reilly (1997) used the term *free agents* to describe mangers who began systematically to manage their own careers by changing companies. Their research found that managers who followed a free agent career model fared better than those who did not. Free agent workers have boundaryless careers; their career identity is independent of an employer and it is their know-how that allows them to function as free agents. Networks are also important to free agent workers. These networks allow free agent workers to take a relational approach to career development.

Career Development Strategies

Since free agents workers have nontraditional careers, they do not have access to traditional career development opportunities that are available to workers who follow more traditional career paths. That does not mean, however, that free agent workers do not continue to develop their careers. Two career development strategies in which free agent workers engage are learning and networking.

Learning

The skills and knowledge that free agent workers possess are what makes them valuable and they engage in learning on a regular basis to keep up to date. Knowing how to learn and adapt are skills that most of them possess (Packer 2000). Free agent workers find that, in many situations, the ability to acquire the required skill rapidly may be just as essential as having a specific expertise: mastering "hot new technology in a snap is a hot skill—not knowing last year's hot new software" (Smith et al. 2000, online, n.p.).

The term *free agent learning* has been coined to describe the type of learning in which free agent workers engage. Free agent learning is voluntary, self-directed and, for free agent learners, its focus is primarily on new jobs. Free agent workers engage in self-directed learning that is career specific so that they can develop competencies that promote their employability and career success (Packer 2000). "With their focus on employability through growth and learning, free agents are essentially free agent learners—independent, highly motivated adults who take responsibility for their own learning and development, use their spare time to learn, use new approaches in learning, and self-teach using a variety of resources" (Short and Opengart 2000, p. 60).

Networking

The development of networks is another career development strategy used by free agent workers. In fact, lack of contact with professional colleagues is one of the major downsides to free agent work, and some have left self-employment to escape the isolation that accompanies it (Leonhardt 2000). To fulfill the need for contact with others, free agent workers are developing networks. The networks, many of which are small groups, are used by free agents to succeed professionally and survive professionally (Pink 1997).

The networks may be virtual (e.g., www.freeagentnation.com/, freeagent.com/Myhome.asp, www.guru.com/, www.fastcompany.com/career/) or take more traditional forms. Some free agent workers use regular conference telephone calls or meetings to solicit and receive advice, set goals, give advice, and provide emotional support (Pink 1997).

Several women in Skokie, Illinois, for example, have formed the Strategy Group that meets monthly in a living room. At their meetings, each participant is allowed a maximum of 20 minutes to speak, with the time divided into four periods: accomplishments, struggles and dilemmas, interactive session, and making commitments for the next month (ibid.).

These networks help free agent workers take a relational approach to their career development and continue to develop their careers through repeated exchanges with others in significant ways (Hall 1996).

Conclusion

Free agent workers provide evidence of how work and the workplace are changing. Certainly not all workers will become free agents, but their emergence is a sign that the line between regular employment and self-employment is blurring (Leonhardt 2000). As more workers assume the characteristics associated with free agents (e.g., frequent job changes, self-direction of career), career development strategies will need to change and expand to meet these needs.

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